



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Advance Release TO THE PMs OF THURSDAY, AUGUST 5, 1943.

To protect American soldiers from dreaded bubonic plague and typhus fever, the Army's School of Military and Tropical Medicine is giving its officers a course in rat control taught by one of the nation's experts, William E. Riter, borrowed from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior.

Rats, ground squirrels, prairie dogs, and field mice—all or some of which can be found around Army camps and establishments—are the chief carriers through the fleas which infest them, of bubonic plague. In the same way Rats are also carriers of endemic typhus fever. The rodents themselves do not transmit the diseases, but they carry fleas whose bites may transfer the disease to human beings.

Riter, who is assistant chief of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Division of Predator and Rodent Control, comes to Washington from his Chicago headquarters each two months to instruct the Army doctors and sanitation experts.

His work not only is important from the standpoint of health, but in the protection of property since destruction by rats every year costs millions of dollars.

Contrary to common impression, house rats are not natives of the United States—all of the three species now prevalent have been imported. It is believed that rats arrived in America along with the first settlers of Jamestown, and many of them could probably claim to be descended from ancestors who came over on the Mayflower.

The first rats to come to the New World were the black and Alexandrian rats of Central Europe and Northern Africa, which got here via England. These are closely related forms, the Alexandrian being a sub-species of the black rat. The brown Norway rat is thought to have been brought to the United States at about the time of the American Revolution—in 1775.

Although the last to arrive, the Norway rat, which is exceptionally pugnacious, soon established itself in the Eastern part of the country and gradually drove the smaller black and Alexandrian rats further South. Now the Norway rat is found in every state of the Union, while the black and Alexandrians exist chiefly in the south.

(over)

The three species have different habits and varying tastes so that different methods are used in exterminating them. The Norway rat, for instance, likes cellars, the lower stories of houses, and underground passages and should be trapped and baited in such places, according to Mr. Riter. The black and Alexandrian rats, on the other hand, prefer attics and the upper stories.

The Norway rat can be poisoned and trapped most effectively through the use of meat and fish baits. The black rats of the Southern states would rather have fruits and vegetables. It will come as a surprise to many Southerners that their rats do not exhibit a special preference for cheese although, Mr. Riter says, a little grated cheese mixed with other foods the rats like is not bad.

House mice, not to be confused with rats, eat cheese readily. The common house mouse, like the rat, is exotic. He came from Europe. There are several species of field mice that are natives.

Both field and house mice also can carry infested fleas and they also, as rats do, spread many germs with their feet as they run around pantries and other places where food is stored.

Complete rat control is possible, Mr. Riter declares, if enough time and energy is devoted to it. To achieve this result four things are necessary:

1. Good sanitation--obtained by cleaning up garbage and rat harborage such as old piles of lumber, and removing the food supply of the rodent.
2. Rat-proofing of buildings--closing the openings through which rats gain access.
3. Poisoning.
4. Trapping.

Getting rid of rats, Mr. Riter points out, is only half the story; continued effort is necessary to keep them out.

###